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# Common Sense

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## Rome, Ally of Democracy?

*Can Catholic authoritarianism be reconciled with "liberal" social doctrines?*

By REV. JOHN F. CRONIN, S. S.

## America's "Rotten Districts"

By STANLEY ROWAN

## Where are the Third Parties?

By DALE KRAMER

## Edgar Lee Masters

By KIMBALL FLACCUS

## Love and War (A Review)

By SELDEN RODMAN

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*See the same page  
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## COMMON SENSE

*A monthly magazine of positive social action devoted to the elimination of war and poverty through democratic planning for abundance.*

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# America's

## "Rotten Districts"

### *What the Poll Tax Means for Southern—and Northern—Democracy*

By Stanley Rowan

BURIED under the waters of the North Sea for two centuries, the "Rotten Borough" of Dunwich still sent its two representatives to the British House of Commons in 1831. So did the grassy mound of Old Sarum whose village had been deserted long before the days of Goldsmith. But while grass and salt water voted, the huge industrial towns of Manchester and Birmingham did not, and even in boroughs that were not rotten a mere fraction of the population had the suffrage.

Lapped by the souging of their pines and cypress and buried under not so grassy mounds of poverty and illiteracy the poll-tax states furnish chief sanctuary to the "Rotten Districts" of the United States. Largely due to this head tax on the right to vote and the archaic one-party system it sustains, 43 Congressmen owe their seats in the House to 1938 elections where *not one vote* was cast for an opposing candidate; 26 more battled an electoral foe armed with less than 100 ballots. In 29 districts the triumphant victor received less than 10,000 votes (3.6% of the 280,000 people in an average district). These, largely in the poll-tax states of Georgia, Virginia, Alabama, Arkansas, Mississippi, South Carolina, Texas and Tennessee, are America's "Rotten Districts." Only eight of the 78 Congressmen from these states had to risk an enfranchised opposition of more than 2,000 dissenting votes.

The sovereign State of Virginia charges a fee of \$1.50 a year, cumulative for three years, for the right to vote. Georgia's poll-tax is \$1, but delinquent collection charges and interest double it, and it is perpetually cumulative. Mississippi has a \$2 poll-tax cumulative for two years. Tennessee has a similar amount minus the cumulative feature but plus delinquency and 12% interest charges. The poll-tax in Arkansas and South Carolina is \$1. In Texas it is \$1.75, while the State of Alabama levies an annual poll-tax of \$1.50 which is cumulative for 24 years.

To put a price on the right to vote not only fosters corruption of Byzantine proportions, but is undemocratic to the core. A dollar or two for the right to vote may not seem like a high price, but 10 cents is too much if one does not have it. And the vast majority of citizens in the poll-tax states don't have the dollar. If they did, landlord, commissary or babies' bare feet would have prior and unpostponable claims. Income in the poll-tax states is extremely low. Arkansas, for example, had an average per capita income in 1937 of \$217 contrasted with a national average of \$547.

As a result of the poll-tax and other attempts at disfranchisement, the vast majority of adult American citizens in the poll-tax states do not vote. Averaging the Presidential election figures of 1928 and 1932 and using the census of 1930, we find that less than 11% of the adult citizenry of South Carolina voted, as against 79% in West Virginia and 66% for the non-poll-tax states as a whole. In the 1936 election, only 12% of the population voted.

If you want a list of the Rotten Districts, turn to pages 251-57 of that invaluable guide to democracy, the Congressional Directory. Two poll-tax states, Arkansas and Mississippi, did not register one solitary opposition vote in the 1938 Congressional elections. In three others, Georgia, South Carolina and Texas, total opposition ballots were 5,120, just over 1% of the 474,371 Democratic votes. Indeed, in the eight poll-tax states only 5.3% voted at all in those elections.

### A Who's Who of Reaction

Representatives chosen by such small electorates necessarily reflect the outlook of the few well-to-do whites who elect them. Consequently, some of the leading conservatives in the House come from these wasp-waist electorates of the Rotten Districts. A striking example is the fact that the total number of winning votes necessary to elect ten



(10) Rotten District representatives, several of whom are well-known for their ultra-conservatism, was less than that required to elect one liberal, Mary Norton, of New Jersey:

1938 Congressional Votes

Democrat	Opposition	District	Congressman	Noted for
12,816	8	Texas	2 Dies	"Un-American" Committee
2,172	0	Miss.	3 Whittington	
3,502	0	Miss.	4 Ford	
11,115	1,488	Ala.	4 Hobbs	Alien Concentration Camp Bill
15,587	49	Ala.	5 Starnes	Anti-alien Bills
5,137	0	Ga.	2 Cox	Ranking Member, Rules Committee
5,622	1	Ga.	7 Tarver	"Economy" Leader on Appropriations Committee
4,363	6	Ga.	6 Vinson	Chairman Naval Affairs Committee
11,509	9,087	Va.	6 Woodrum	Reducing WPA funds
13,796	56	Va.	8 Smith	Chairman, NLRB Investigating Committee
85,619	10,695			
89,287	22,459	N. J.	13 Norton	Liberal Chairman, House Labor Committee

The degree of political democracy in any district may well be measured by the percentage of the population that votes.

It is often charged, however, that due to one-party supremacy in the South, the votes cast in elections do not fairly indicate the degree of democracy. Of course, if there were true democracy, there would be no one-party supremacy. However, let us go, as we are urged, to the Democratic primaries. It is true, as a rule, that somewhat more people in the poll-tax states vote in the primaries than in the elections. But not many. Primary figures for representatives are not easy to secure, yet out of accessible statistics for 64 primaries and 64 elections in three campaigns (1934-6-8) and four states (Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi and Tennessee) the following fact emerges: Total Democratic primary votes were not quite 50% more than total election votes.



Even this added 50% means that less than 11% of the people voted in the Democratic primaries.

As a counterpart of the uncontested election we have the uncontested primary. Four representatives in their Congressional Directory biographies boast of their unchallenged primaries. Out of the 64 primaries mentioned above 22, or over one-third, were uncontested. In Alabama in 1934 four out of nine primaries were undisputed; in Georgia in 1936 five out of ten. Indeed, out of these 64 campaigns 12 candidates did not receive one single opposition vote in either primary or election. So efficiently has the one-party juggernaut crushed democracy that sometimes the same candidate goes on year after year with neither primary nor election opposition.

This lack of a primary vote is in large measure due to the poll-tax, which in seven of the eight states applies to primaries as well as to elections. The sole exception is South Carolina where, until recently, no Negro might vote in a Democratic primary unless he were personally vouched for by 10 "reputable" white men who stated that of their personal knowledge he had voted for General Wade Hampton in 1876 and had voted the Democratic ticket continuously ever since.

How the Southern Bourbons Rule

Due to the lack of a broad electorate it is relatively easy for the Rotten District representative to maintain a machine control over the few voters permitted to come to the polls and thus to keep himself in Congress for prolonged periods.

Inevitably he reflects the views of his "constituents" as distinguished from non-voting citizens in his district, and he votes in Congress for measures that will aid that small segment of the people who vote, though such measures often are directly contrary to the interests of the far greater number who do not. If the truth of the small popular support enjoyed by these Rotten Districts representatives were more generally known, the prevailing disposition to identify the opinions and the interests of the South with the views of the poll-tax Congressmen should cease.

What a holding company the poll-tax system is can be understood when we remember that Cox of Georgia, with a thimble-sized constituency, held up the Wage and Hour Bill for 18 months by refusing to give it a rule in the Rules Committee, and thus thwarted, presumably, the will of the 15,500,000 Democrats from the poll-tax-free states who voted in 1936 for Roosevelt and the New Deal platform that included this Wage and Hour legislation.

Owing to the effect of the poll tax in keeping



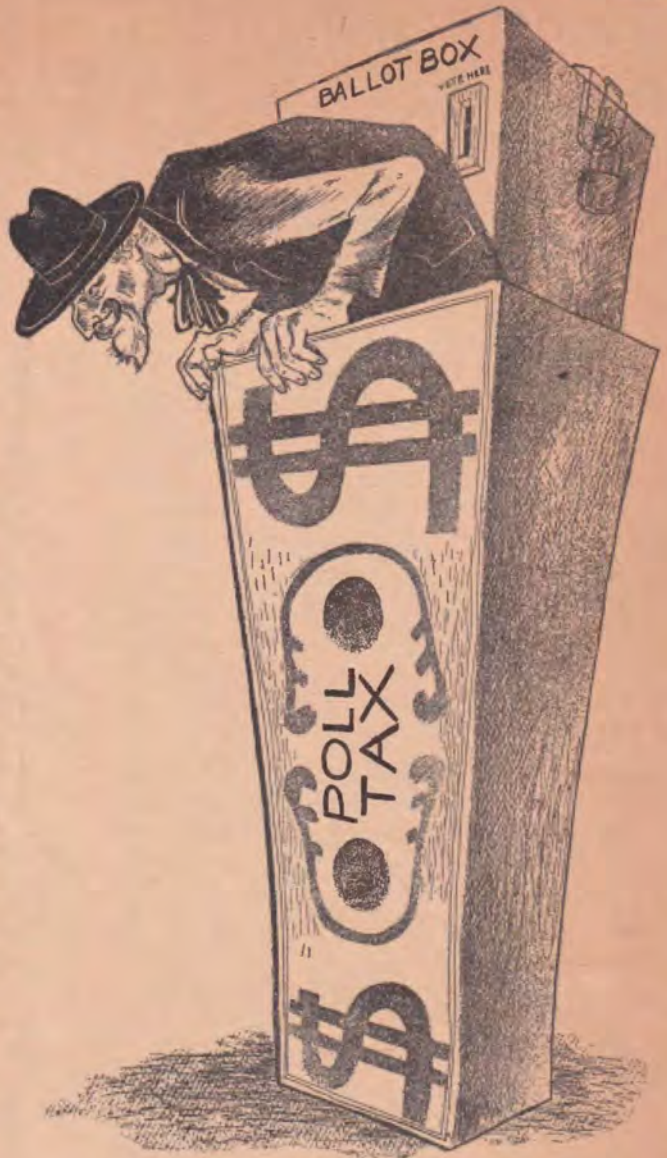
Rotten District representatives in power for prolonged periods, we find that of the 30 Congressmen with more than 20 years consecutive service 12 are from Rotten Districts; and of the 13 Senators of similar tenure, 5 are from poll-tax states. The poll-tax states contribute, both to the House and Senate more than twice their due quota of long tenure members.

This protracted grip on congressional office results, through the system of seniority, in a plurality of committee chairmanships going to Rotten District representatives during Democratic administrations. The power of committee chairmen in pushing or throttling legislation is great. If they are reactionary, progressive legislation, though desired by a vast majority of the people and even of Congress itself, may be killed in committee almost single-handed. Of the 47 standing committees in the House, 16, or over one-third, have chairmen from the Rotten Districts. In the Senate, 11 of the 33 standing committee chairmen are from poll-tax states.

By depriving the Negroes in the South of the vote the white upper classes have actually *increased* their power in the federal government relative to population, beyond what it was prior to the Civil War. Under slavery only 3/5 of the Negroes were counted in determining the population basis for representation in the National Congress. But today *all* of the Negro population is counted in determining the basis for representation. In 1930 there were 7,929,451 Negroes in the poll-tax states, a number sufficient to justify 28 representatives. Since almost none of these Negroes vote, this means that the dominant whites control 28 representatives with no enfranchised population base; and this is 11 more, proportionately, than they would have had under the pre-Civil War arrangement. It appears that the Southern planters lost the War, but won the election.

Contrary to the popular supposition, however, far more Southern whites than Negroes are disfranchised by the poll-tax. If we assume, for example, that all votes cast in the Congressional elections of 1938 were white votes, we find that of the white population only 7.9% voted, a percentage that sank to 3.7% in Georgia and 3.6% in Mississippi.

In a nutshell, what this means for the rest of the country is that representatives, including many liberals and progressives, democratically elected from non-poll-tax states by majorities 3 to 18 times those received by their poll-tax colleagues, often are out-voted, or have their votes nullified, by representatives from the Rotten Districts elected by narrow constituencies of the most conservative elements; and these poll-tax representatives remain



"Step right up and cast your vote, folks!"

entrenched in their seats and in their chairmanships decade after decade (Rayburn, Sumner and Vinson, 28 years each), where they are in a position to thwart progressive legislation in the nation in the same way as the poll-tax curbs democracy at home.

North Carolina abolished the poll tax in 1920. Her popular vote is now five-and-a-half times as great proportionately as in the neighboring poll-tax state of South Carolina. Louisiana was freed from the poll tax by Huey Long in 1934, though deep wounds still remain. Pepper abolished it in Florida in 1938 and the primary vote doubled. Thus the poll tax is definitely on its way out. But it will not go by itself; and its departure will be retarded by every feudal planter, by every corrupt politician, by every Tory mill-owner whose economic and political power has rested on the denial of the suffrage to his fellow citizens.